

## Dr. James Zogby-US Commission on International Religious Freedom Ignores Israeli Violations

One of **We Hold These Truths**'s early projects was to challenge the Religious Freedom Act in 1997 that resulted in the formation of the **US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)** with its director located in the State Department (see: "[Christian and Republican Leaders Link Arms With the Warmakers' for Religious Monitoring](#)," "[STOP Federal Religious Monitoring](#)"). In 1998, **We Hold These Truths** founder, Chuck Carlson, wrote:

Congress is being pressured to pass HR2431 by internationalist, Warmaker controlled, Non Government Organizations including Hudson Institute and Freedom House.\* A host of TV Evangelists and mail-order missionaries have been induced to join in the demand to create a new, powerful Presidential office to monitor religion under the misguided front of protecting Christians worldwide.

Equally ominous, the warmaking authority reserved for the Congress is to be deeded to the Office of the President, who would then have the raw power to make economic war on any country without permission of Congress or without even invoking emergency powers acts as he did in November to punish the people of Sudan. Once created, the Office will, no doubt, be staffed by Warmakers with window dressing, front men furnished by the supportive, conservative, Christian organizations.

During his tenure on the **USCIRF**, as one of the commissioners, [Dr. James Zogby](#) frequently requested that the commission investigate Israel's treatment of Muslims, Christians and non-Orthodox Jews, to no avail. Dr. Zogby argues that the commission has ?an obligation to consider Israel's use of religion to discriminate against both its own citizens and Palestinians living in the occupied territories.? [Ed.TEC]

Dr. James Zogby Slams Religious Freedom Commission for Ignoring Israeli Violations ? Israel/Palestine

washingtonreport.me - May 7, 2017

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) was established in 1998 with the mandate of monitoring global violations of religious freedom and making policy recommendations to the president, secretary of state and Congress. The commission's annual report catalogues violations of religious liberty in a large number of countries, including Russia, China and many Middle Eastern nations. Israel, however, has never been mentioned in the report.



During his four-year tenure, outgoing commissioner Dr. James Zogby frequently requested that the commission investigate Israel's treatment of Muslims, Christians and non-Orthodox Jews. On several occasions, representatives of these faith communities appealed directly to the USCIRF, but the commission invariably dismissed their concerns.

Deeply troubled by what he witnessed on the commission, Zogby is now publically criticizing USCIRF's apparent unwillingness to subject Israel to scrutiny.

In a [five-page statement of dissent](#), Zogby bemoans the "continuing and glaring refusal of some commissioners to even allow for a consideration of religious freedom in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories." The commission, he argued, has "an obligation to consider Israel's use of religion to discriminate against both its own citizens and Palestinians living in the occupied territories."

Speaking at an April 26 press conference on Capitol Hill, Zogby highlighted several poignant instances in which the commission ignored the concerns of religious groups in Israel and Palestine:

1) Shortly after Zogby joined USCIRF in 2013, the nine-person commission decided to [pen an op-ed](#) at Christmas highlighting the plight of Middle Eastern Christians. Referring to the region as the "cradle of Christianity," the op-ed noted anti-Christian activity in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Pakistan and Nigeria—but not Israel. "I said, to the best of my knowledge, the cradle was Bethlehem," Zogby recalled. He informed his fellow commissioners of the concerns he frequently heard from Palestinian Christians. His concerns were "absolutely shut down," he said. "The op-ed went out without any mention of this at all."

2) In July 2014, Fouad Twal, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, shared his concerns with the commission. In particular, he cited Israel's plans to seize land belonging to Palestinian Christians; Knesset legislation requiring Arab Christians in Israel to list their religious affiliation on their ID cards; Israeli laws that make it difficult for Palestinians to remain residents of Jerusalem and unify with their families; and restrictions on movement for clergy and the faithful alike.

"The commission not only refused to recognize the patriarch's concerns, but dismissed him rather rudely, actually with two commissioners challenging him as to why he didn't use his good offices to challenge Hamas," Zogby noted. "He left the meeting rather shaken. No action was taken."

Fr. Drew Christiansen, a Jesuit priest who has consulted the Vatican on Middle East issues, was at the meeting between Twal and the commission. "What was remarkable about Patriarch Twal's meeting with the commission was the skeptical and defensive way in which the USCIRF commissioners received the patriarch's message," he recalled. The commission displayed "little, if any, effort to learn about his concerns, whether for Arab Christians living in Israel, or Palestinian Christians in Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza," he added.

Having dealt with this issue for many years, Christiansen said he was hardly surprised by the commission's treatment of Twal. "Patriarch Twal's reception was consistent with the indifference I've come to expect from the commission on questions of Palestinian religious liberty," he said.

3) Earlier this year, the commission received two letters urging it to look into Israel's religious practices and policies. [The first letter](#) "signed by 11 major U.S. religious communities and 34 Christian groups in the West Bank, Gaza and Jerusalem" highlighted a 192-page [report by Palestine Works](#), an association of attorneys that seeks to promote Palestinian human rights. The report applied the commission's own standards to Israel and found that the country directly violates several of these standards.

The signatories to the letter were dismissed by the commission as being insignificant, anti-Semitic, and focused only on targeting Israel, Zogby recalled. "My response was, I'm not singling Israel out, you're singling it out as the only country we can't criticize," he said.

A second letter was sent by Hiddush, a group of Israeli and North American Jews who work to promote religious freedom in Israel. The letter raised concerns about "the excessive power of the Orthodox religious parties [in Israel] over the rights and dignity of the population as a whole." Again, the commission disregarded the appeal.

In discussing these letters, Zogby said, some commissioners expressed concern that investigating Israel would envelop the commission in an endless debate. Several commissioners also feared the prospect of losing congressional funding. "In a sense, we got bullied into silence," Zogby said. "It wasn't that we lost the vote," he added. "It was the way that the discussion took place that prompted me to decide to come to you today."

In his written dissent, Zogby charged that the commission is betraying its mandate by granting Israel immunity from criticism. "By refusing to examine Israeli behavior, we are saying to Palestinian Christians and Muslims, and non-Orthodox or secular Jews in Israel, that we will not defend their freedoms and rights," he wrote.

Zogby additionally warned that the commission is impugning its credibility by providing cover for Israel. "We are exposing the commission to the charge that we have a double standard—that we will criticize every other country, but never Israel," he said. "In fact, many of the behaviors we cite in our criticisms of other countries (for example, Turkey in Cyprus or Russia in Crimea) are replicated by Israel in the occupied territories." Aundrea Alexander, associate general secretary of the National Council of Churches, expressed the same concern. "When USCIRF arbitrarily chooses not to [investigate] certain nations, such as Israel," she said, "it indicates that this commission is but a tool of American foreign policy—willing to bludgeon those countries our nation has identified as enemies, and to protect those that we see as allies."

"Dale Sprusansky